

Boko Haram

byname of Jamāʿat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Daʿawah wa al-Jihād (Arabic: “Association of the People of the Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad”)

byname of Jamāʿat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Daʿawah wa al-Jihād (Arabic: “Association of the People of the Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad”)Islamic sectarian movement, founded in 2002 by Muhammed Yusuf in northeastern Nigeria, that since 2009 has carried out assassinations and large-scale acts of violence in that country. The group’s initial proclaimed intent was to uproot the corruption and injustice in Nigeria, which it blamed on Western influences, and to impose Sharīʿah, or Islamic law. Later the group vowed to avenge the deaths of Yusuf and other group members, who were killed by security forces in 2009.

Origins

Yusuf established the group in Maiduguri, the capital of the northeastern state of Borno. Although the original name of the group is Jamāʿat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Daʿawah wa al-Jihād (often translated as “Association of the People of the Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad” or “Association Committed to the Spread of Islam Through Jihad”), the name Boko Haram, which means “Westernization is sacrilege,” was given to the group by neighbours based on how they viewed its lifestyle and teachings. This, in turn, was popularly interpreted as “Western education is a sin” or “Western education is forbidden.” Ideologically, Boko Haram is against Westernization, which it views as negatively impacting Islamic values. The group blames Western influences for Nigeria’s culture of corruption, which has contributed to a wide gap between the few rich and the many poor.

Early activity

Boko Haram gained widespread exposure in July 2009 when, after an incident in which group members were allegedly subjected to the excessive use of force by police and then were unable to get official investigation into the matter, the group launched attacks on police posts and other government installations, killing scores of police officers. When the police could not bring the situation under control, the army was brought in. The ensuing Joint Military Task Force operation left more than 700 Boko Haram members dead and destroyed the mosque that the group used as its headquarters. Yusuf and other leaders were arrested by the military and handed over to the police. A few days later the bullet-riddled corpses of Yusuf and his colleagues—including that of his father-in-law, Baba Fugu Mohammed, who had willingly handed himself over to the police for questioning—were displayed in public; the extrajudicial killings by the police infuriated the group as well as others.

After that incident, Boko Haram appeared to be disbanded, or at least inactive, until the next year, when a video was made public in which Yusuf’s deputy, Abubakar Shekau, declared that he was the group’s new leader and vowed to avenge the deaths of Yusuf and the others.

Resurgence

In the summer of 2010, the group began to assassinate individuals, typically police officers, and also attacked larger targets. One early operation that garnered widespread attention occurred in September 2010, when the group attacked a prison in the city of Bauchi, in Bauchi state, and released more than 700 inmates, including

some 100 Boko Haram members. Later that year, on Christmas Eve, the group attacked two Christian churches in Maiduguri and detonated explosives in Christian neighbourhoods in Jos, in Plateau state, the latter attack killing more than 30 people.

Boko Haram's attacks increased in frequency and magnitude, killing and injuring many. The attacks occurred primarily in Nigeria's northeast, north-central, and central states and typically focused on police, military, and government targets, as well as Christian churches and schools and Muslim individuals who were critical of the group. On August 26, 2011, the group struck its first high-profile international target within Nigeria when a suicide bomber crashed a car into the United Nations building in Abuja and detonated an explosive, which killed at least 23 people and injured more than 100 others. One of Boko Haram's deadliest attacks occurred on January 20, 2012, when more than 185 people lost their lives after group members launched coordinated attacks in the city of Kano, in Kano state, targeting police stations and government offices.

After its 2010 resurrection, Boko Haram's membership and organizational structure were not clear. The group reportedly had begun splintering into multiple factions sometime after Yusuf's death, with the main faction being led by Shekau. Security reports indicated that Boko Haram had links with other terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM) and al-Shabaab in Somalia. In February 2013 some Boko Haram members reportedly began operating in neighbouring Cameroon.

The shadowy nature of Boko Haram as well as its resilience made it difficult to craft an effective strategy to end the group's campaign of terror. The Nigerian government initially responded by pursuing a strategy of military confrontation. This did little to end the attacks, though government forces were eventually somewhat successful in driving the group from larger cities. In 2013 it was apparent that Boko Haram had taken over many rural local government areas in northeastern states, where they were able to gain strength. Also troubling was the manner in which government security forces pursued the group, a manner that was often rife with extrajudicial violence and killings, and troops did not always discriminate between group members and civilians. Such methods heightened tensions in a country already on edge from Boko Haram's attacks and elicited widespread condemnation from human rights groups.

In April 2013 Shekau dismissed a proposal from Nigerian Pres. Goodluck Jonathan to grant amnesty to Boko Haram militants if they disarmed; Shekau declared that Boko Haram members had done nothing for which they needed amnesty. The next month Boko Haram launched a series of coordinated military-style attacks in the town of Bama, in Borno state. The attacks left more than 50 people dead and destroyed numerous police, military, and government buildings. The group also released more than 100 inmates from a prison in the town. In response, the government launched its largest-scale military offensive against Boko Haram to date, employing thousands of troops on the ground and a campaign of air strikes to combat the group. In spite of the military's actions, Boko Haram continued with its horrific attacks—including many on schools—resulting in more than 1,200 deaths by the end of 2013.

On the heels of the military offensive, in June President Jonathan had officially declared Boko Haram a terrorist group and banned it under Nigerian law, which meant that group members and anyone caught aiding them would be prosecuted under the country's Terrorism Prevention Act. The new legal designation was expected to make it easier for authorities to prosecute members of the group legally.

Boko Haram's attacks persisted into 2014, particularly in the northeast, as the group raided villages and terrorized and murdered civilians with increasing frequency. The group also killed hundreds of people by detonating bombs in large towns and cities, including Abuja. Boko Haram continued to target schools, such as in the February attack on a college in Yobe state where some 50 male students were killed and the college was virtually destroyed. The group drew worldwide condemnation after it perpetrated a mass kidnapping of more than 275 girls from a boarding school in Chibok in Borno state in April, which generated an increase in offers of international assistance to Nigeria as the country attempted to quell Boko Haram's acts of terror. In May the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on individuals in Boko Haram, freezing assets and issuing

travel bans and an arms embargo. However, given the group's informal structure, the sanctions had no discernible effect on Boko Haram's operations. The group continued its attacks and expanded the territory it occupied. In August 2014 Boko Haram declared the area under its control to be an Islamic state.

The tide appeared to begin to turn in the fight against Boko Haram in February 2015 when a successful offensive was planned and launched by Nigeria and neighbouring countries, which proved effective in uprooting Boko Haram from much of the area it had previously held. Meanwhile, the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an insurgent group operating primarily in Iraq and Syria, in March 2015.

Cite

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